

## guilty of dust by palmviolet

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**Summary:**

it's when she's stringing up washing on the long, spindly line on her weatherbeaten front yard, a cigarette hanging between her teeth and the old dried-up birdbath her ashtray, that Bob tells her, "You know, you might want to rethink your smoking habit."

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### Author's Note:

so, i guess i'm back? don't hold out too much hope, though, because i don't know if i'm here to stay. anyway. beware of self-harming/self-destructive behaviours, fateful nicotine addiction and the struggle to kick it, and a multitude of mental health issues. title is from frank bidart's poem of the same name.

for mya, because i love you.

It's when she's stringing up washing on the long, spindly line on her weatherbeaten front yard, a cigarette hanging between her teeth and the old dried-up birdbath her ashtray, that Bob tells her, "You know, you might want to rethink your smoking habit."

For a moment his words don't register; when they do, her jaw slackens and the cigarette falls into the sheet she was hanging, burning a perfectly circular hole in it before she snatches it away. She turns to stare at him. Her cigarette is wasted and she no longer wants to smoke it — but she clings onto it, pinches it between her fingers, refuses to look like she's doing what he tells her to. "I'm sorry, what?"

He shrugs a little, color a little high, eyes a little downcast. Embarrassed to say it, but he says it anyway: "It's not very good for you. You ever read those little labels?" He reaches, without asking, for the half-empty pack of Camels on the side of the birdbath/ashtray. "'Caution: cigarette smoking may be hazardous to your health.' That's what it says."

She finally discards the cigarette in favor of grabbing the packet from him, running her thumb over the warning label as if she could erase

it. "Yes, I read them. What does 'hazardous' even mean?" It's a useless word. She knows a lot worse than *hazardous*. She knows blue light and faceless monsters and her son not breathing — nothing's hazardous to that. Not the lit cigarette she's been smoking twenty a day of since she was sixteen.

"It means lung cancer, Joyce. Maybe." He shifts in the garden chair, which creaks as he moves. Suddenly he bears a strange resemblance to the gnome on his left; suddenly she is embarrassed by him. "It means I— I don't know. I'd like you to look after yourself."

She thinks about the fifty a day she smoked when Will— in that week in November, and nearly laughs. If there is a cancer it's already collecting in her cells, already multiplying, blooming. She took off her hazmat suit in the Upside Down, breathed in wrong air. If there was something toxic there then Will's already dead, and wouldn't she like to be halfway there too? Wouldn't she like to keep her heartbeat under control, give her fingers something to do, breathe in smoke instead of panic? "I'm doing fine," she says, and then consciously has to soften her voice, "thank you."

He smiles at her, shy. "I didn't mean you're not. I just meant— well. I'd like you to be around a little longer, is all."

The images of crawling black things in a blue, alien world recede, for now. Bob's softness in the face of a world that is anything but once again becomes endearing, not humiliating. She puts the pack down on the edge of the birdbath and watches a lone starling hop close to it and then retreat, finding cigarette butts rather than water — water long since dried up anyway, after the heat of a long summer.

She drops the ruined sheet back in the laundry basket and crosses to Bob's garden chair, cups his cheek in her hand, kisses him soft. "I'm sorry," she says. "That's sweet."

"Think about it?"

"Okay," she allows. "I'll think about it."

#

She does think about it. She thinks about it when she's lighting her twelfth on the couch that afternoon; she thinks about it when she's lighting her nineteenth when the boys have gone to bed. She finishes her twentieth in the bathroom and decides, as she's brushing her teeth, erasing tobacco and tar for fresh, cheap mint, to see how long she can last. If she makes it to lunchtime tomorrow without caving — fine. She'll make a go of it, like Bob wants her to. She's not so beholden to them as all that, is she? She'll be fine. Besides. Quitting is cheaper.

But four a.m. finds her with her heart in her throat, shaking on the faded green tiles as she tells herself that Will is fine, Will is *fine*, he's just in the next room and nothing's going to get him again, not ever, the front door is locked and nothing will come in, but still she has to linger in his doorway twelve times that hour, another habit she struggles to kick, and by then she knows there's only one way to still the trembling of her yellowed fingers. So—

She makes it five hours. She lights a cigarette, tries to ignore the flowers Bob gave her for the vase on the kitchen table. She takes herself back to bed after two more and has another instead of breakfast, with the result that when Bob brings her lunch at work he wrinkles his nose at the reek of smoke.

"Are you okay?" he asks, wisely veiling the real question, which is probably *Aren't you meant to be quitting?*

She takes a bite of her sandwich to avoid answering. But she's not hungry, and it goes down like sandpaper. "I didn't sleep very well," she says, when she's swallowed it down. "I'm a little out of it."

He looks at her like he wants to know exactly how she sleeps; like he wants to be beside her when she does. Soon, she thinks. Not right now. They're still waiting on Will's test results from Chicago; when those arrive, things will be calmer. Jonathan won't react quite so badly to the assimilation of a possible new father figure. Joyce won't wake so many times in the middle of the night.

That evening Hopper swings by after work; when she tells him Will is out with his friends (trying and failing to keep the tremor out of her voice), he shrugs and comes in anyway. “I don’t have to see him to find out how he’s doing, do I? You keep tabs on it well enough.”

She flushes, unsure whether it’s a compliment or not. With him it could be both. (Or neither.) He’s sweating in the late August heat; he leaves his gun belt on a chair and drops into the one beside it, rubbing his hands over his face. He looks tired, though she could be projecting. “Long day?” she asks, sitting opposite him.

“Yeah,” he says, but nothing further. He’s been distant, lately — though that’s probably the wrong word. More busy than distant. He drops in when he can. “Smoke?”

For a moment she hesitates. “Bob’s trying to get me to quit.”

“Is he.” Hopper’s face is carefully neutral. “Isn’t that your decision?”

She finds herself forced to defend Bob, despite it all. “Hop, he’s probably right. It’s not good for us.”

He’s silent for a moment. “What does Bob know about what’s good for us?” and she winces. He’s right about that. And yet. “Do you want a smoke or not?”

He holds the unlit cigarette out to her. After only a second she takes it.

#

That’s the first day she tries to quit. The second is a fresh morning at the start of September, when she wakes up to gray light and leans over to fetch a cigarette before she feels Bob’s eyes on her back and turns back to him in bed empty-handed, empty-lipped. She brought him home when Chicago told her they couldn’t help Will; she thought she might as well throw it all to the wind. (Though she makes him leave before the boys get up, or after they go. No sense in an

unnecessary collision.)

She figures if she just doesn't think about it, if she just— eats, and goes to work, and kisses Bob as hard as she can, then the cravings just won't come, and she just won't ever buy another pack of Camels again.

Deep down, she knows better than this. But still.

When she finishes work she's itching out of her skin; she wants it very badly. She's wondering why this is worth it. She's wondering why any of this is worth it and she has enough sense left to cut that thought off where it starts because it's just a fucking *cigarette*, for God's sake, there are more important things in this world, like her lungs, like her kids' lungs. Like sticking to this thing on the goddamn principle of it.

So she endures the night without caving. In the morning Jonathan looks with a certain suspicious surprise at the empty ashtray on the table, and she doesn't mean to but she snaps at him when he's reluctant to drive Will to school. The itching hasn't gone away. She'd like to shed her skin entirely, lie in an ice-cold bath in a darkened room far away where no one can fucking annoy her. When Melvald chews her out for being late she snarls right back; when Hopper rings and tells her that he's checked out the guy in Boston and he's *a total quack, actually, there's no point, he'll bleed you dry and for what?* she hangs up without saying anything, clenches her fists together, knuckles white, until she lets out a scream of frustration and pounds her hand against the counter.

The store is empty. She's aware she looks insane. And she's starting to feel insane; the itch has turned to outright discomfort, to a churning in her stomach and a feeling that her heart is only a single missed beat from utter collapse. Her head hurts. She feels like something's about to go wrong.

But she goes home after work and she's hungry, for once, so she makes three portions of spaghetti instead of two and a half. Afterwards she eats a slice of buttered bread standing up in the kitchen; she hasn't been hungry like this since she was pregnant. She hasn't been hungry like this in forever. It's nice, she thinks, to enjoy a

meal. To feel full. She spends the evening by herself on the porch, finds herself reaching for a smoke out of habit but doesn't take one out.

#

On the third day, things get worse. She takes three ibuprofen over the course of the night when her headache won't kick; when it finally does, at six in the morning, her anxiety replaces it. And that's the end of her sleeping, so when Jonathan emerges blinking in the early golden light he finds her hunched over the kitchen sink, running cold water over her wrists in a desperate attempt to calm herself down.

"Hey, what's going on?" he asks, in his gentle, low voice.

She turns and presses the heels of her still-wet hands into her eyes; it's a testament to the way her stomach is churning that she tells him the truth. "I'm so tired of feeling like something bad's going to happen."

"What is it?"

"Nothing, I just—" She looks at the ashtray on the table. "Cold turkey is kicking my ass."

"Don't push yourself too hard, mom," he says, eyes wide. Eyes concerned. "Like— it's good, and all that, but there's a lot going on right now."

But that's just the thing, isn't it? The pushing herself. The finishing it. Now she's started she can't just stop and it has to *work*, hasn't it, just like the lights have to flicker a certain way before she turns them out or else she has to do it herself, pushing the switch up and down against all the evils in the world in the hope that by doing it she can protect her sons. Which makes no sense, she knows this, but she hangs herself on it anyway because there are nonsensical things you have to do when the world is against you. When the world is cruel. Will hasn't had an episode since she stopped smoking. Which isn't a

long while, really, but it feels like it counts. It feels like maybe it's on her. And it feels like maybe if she fails then more will go wrong, and — again, stupid — she really can't be blaming herself for something else. She can't.

So, "I'm doing okay, Jonathan. I promise. *No time like the present*, right?" and she says the idiom with a little roll of her eyes, a little exaggeration at the corner of her lips, as if to show she knows it's trite. She knows it's pathetic. But lately the thing seems to be that which she lives by — or rather, *any day could be your last*. Sometimes she goes to sleep and wonders if she'll wake up again.

"Okay," he says, with a quick smile. He kisses her on the cheek, and makes her breakfast, though her appetite is tapering off again. It's less *I need a smoke*, now, and more *I need a safe place*. She thinks about crawling into the space between her bed and the floor, like she did when she was a teen. Staring up at the boards and the mattress and the springs, motes of dust in the air, discarded socks, broken jewellery. Letting the closeness of it squeeze her lungs back down her throat. But she doesn't: she eats a slice of toast and goes to work.

#

And Bob comes over that night.

She thought about cancelling; she really thought about cancelling. Telling him she was sick, the boys were sick, the roof had fallen in over their heads. Never once did she consider telling him the truth — that she had three panic attacks in her ten hour shift and her nerves feel like an electric fire, and that she's too exhausted to even contemplate eating anything, sitting on the couch, going to bed with him and pretending like she's fine. But the counter to all this is that the thought of picking up the phone makes her feel physically ill, because she still can't shake the sound of her son's breathing, his voice, his fear...

So. Bob comes over. And they have dinner, because he brings it with



him. She sinks into his side afterwards and he shifts against her, knits his eyebrows together. "Hey," he says. "Are you okay? Your heart is racing."

She manages a frazzled smile: "Sorry. Got a lot on my mind."

"You can talk to me about it. If you want. I'm happy to listen."

Her stomach does its little ugly swoop it does when she feels particularly cornered, and she shakes her head. "I'm okay," she says, between breaths. Her lungs have felt shallow all day. "I'm tired, mostly. I've been trying to quit smoking, like you said."

He genuinely brightens. "That's great, Joyce. I'm proud of you."

She's not sure whether she wants him to be proud. She's not sure anyone's ever been proud of her in her life and she's not sure she's comfortable to start it with him, or with this. And then there's the whole matter of the lie.

Which matter comes to a deadly sharp head that night, when she wakes out of a dream that has Will disappearing out of her hands, taken again, unreachable again, lights dark forever and everything going wrong— when she wakes out of this dream, and can't catch her breath, and knows nothing for certain only that Will is *gone* and she has to *find him*— when someone is grabbing for her shoulders but she has to get away, she has to get her son, and she's saying over and over "Will's gone, it's taken him, the thing's taken him again—" but she doesn't make it any further than the end of the bed because her legs buckle without enough air in her lungs and everything feels so useless, really, she can't hope to save her son when she let him get taken in the first place and so what point is there in— but still he needs her— she needs to save him— but she can't—

When she comes back to some sort of awareness, she's on the floor. Her head is between her knees and Bob is stroking her hair, looking like a frightened deer but staying close to her nonetheless. Her throat is dry. There's a distinct possibility she might throw up.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing she says, disentangling herself and leaning back against the bed.

His eyes are unfocused. "What you were saying— about the *thing*— taking Will again? What did you mean?"

She swallows. She shakes her head. "I don't know," she says, because it's all she can say. It's all she's allowed to say. She rests her head back against the mattress. "I'm sorry. Smoking— the withdrawal— it's made me anxious. It's made it worse."

She'd like him to say *I'm sorry, Joyce, I didn't realise. I didn't know.* But he doesn't. He says instead, "You know, I meant it. When I said you could talk to me. You can."

But she can't. And can never. "I just have a lot going on," she says, voice hoarse. "Not even— it's just work. And the boys. And the house falling to bits, and— yeah. I'm not— I'm okay. I'm sorry you had to see that."

"Don't be sorry," he says, emphatically. "I don't mind."

After a while, she climbs back into bed with him. But when she feels his breathing even out, his customary snore begin, she slips out of the covers on still-shaky legs and has a cigarette on the porch. It tastes like defeat; it also tastes like that elusive, terrible calm she's been searching for all her life and scarcely ever found. Who can blame her, for the little things she needs? Who can blame her?

Bob doesn't mention her smoking again. When she and Hopper take Will to the lab for the first time, she smokes a whole pack in under three hours. The second time? She smokes it in two.

And when Bob dies, she considers it again. In his honor. But at this point she's not sleeping at all, snapping a rubber band on her wrist whenever she gets too lost in her head. The cigarette keeps her grounded.

In January, when she's smoking with Hopper on her porch watching the snow after a miserable Christmas, he looks at her and says evenly, "So you didn't quit, in the end."

"No," she says. She runs her thumb over the inside of her wrist, before taking the cigarette as he hands it back to her. "I didn't."

“I s’pose he was good for you. He had the wrong idea about you, but he was good for you.”

“But I wasn’t good for him.” She looks across the field; the view is bleak. Will’s inside, staying warm. She’s not sure why she hesitates to join him.

The cigarette is finished. She stubs it out in the ashtray but remains standing there, shivering, nose numb. “Another?” he asks, after a moment. His voice is gritty, full of its own sorrows. He, too, has an idea about her. She’s yet to see if it’s the right one.

And yet—

She nods. She takes the cigarette, and continues to watch the snow.

### **Author’s Note:**

comment below, let me know what you think, all that jazz. much love, anya